

[E. R. Kaiser]

W15075

Politics, WPA, etc. Typed 1/10/39 Typed 1/10/39 Francis Donovan

Thomaston, Conn

Thursday, Dec. 15 '38

E. R. Kaiser, First Selectman, former superintendent of the Seth Thomas Clock Company:

"The town's been Republican as long as I can remember, with only one or two exceptions. Never did go anything but Republic in the national elections. But once Tom Gotsell got elected selectman on the Democratic ticket, and twice there were Democratic representatives elected to the state legislature. I forgot what the issue was that Gotsell was elected on.

"The representatives were Randall T. Andrews and Reverend Ellsworth Tracy. He was minister down here at the [Episcopal?] church. They were both very well thought of—got votes from both parties, I suppose that's why they were elected

"Politics played a big part in the life of this town years ago. Campaigns were hot, and there was always a big celebration afterwards. Used to have [too?] torchlight parades, and the whole town would turn out, either to watch 'em or to march.

"Republicans had what they called a wigwam up there on Main street, between Flint's gas station and McGrath's, and they'd organize their parades up there. Each man wore a blue cape and carried a lantern on his shoulder. There were two bands in town, those days, Grilley's band and the Clock Shop band, and they'd both turn out.

Votes used to be bought—that is before the secret ballot was adopted.

Library of Congress

Some [sold?] 'em pretty cheap. I remember one old fellow who sold out to one party for a dollar—then sold out to the other for the same price. The lad that bought his vote first caught him at the polls and took the ballot away from him. Used to be fights at the polls—very frequently.

2

“But one thing, by God, you might mention—they didn't have to go after anyone and give 'em a ride to the polls the way they do now. People appreciated the franchise and they didn't have to be urged to vote.

“Yes, I know the vote last election was a record-breaker, but you want to remember the party workers were responsible for a great deal of it. Had to almost go down on their hands and knees to get some of them to come down and be made.

“I will say there's been a revival of something like the old-time spirit the past couple years. People are interested again—with this difference, mind you—they're not holdin' to party lines as much as they used to. Trend is towards independent voting—all you have to do is look at the results of the last election to see it. Times get hard, people are always more interested in politics. Lot of 'em will vote when business is bad that would never vote otherwise.

“Back in the old days they used to come in from the outlying districts with their buggies—bring their lunches and spend the day in town on election day. Always had the town meeting in the afternoon, started at 2 O'clock, and they counted the votes right after the polls closed—give the farmers a chance to get home early and do their chores.

“Now they all got cars—they can dash in here and vote quick as anybody else.

“One thing nobody can say, by the gods, is that this office plays politics with relief. That's one thing I don't believe in. A man comes in here and shows where he needs help, and he gets it, regardless of politics. I don't care whether he's a Republican or a Democrat or

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a Socialist—or if he isn't even a citizen, if he hasn't got enough to eat, we see that he gets enough to eat. Lots of people are out of work today through no fault of their own. They've got to be helped. No paupers today. We don't have a pauper list 3 any more. And those we can't get on the WPA we do the best we can to help other ways. We got a system here—we pay give the ones on direct relief living expenses and they pay the town back so many hours of work at the same rate of pay as WPA. That way, they can't be called paupers. No, sir, no more pauper list in this town.”

Mr. Odenwald:

“I don't know as you remember my wife's father, old Mr. Undorf. He was quite a clockmaker. Came here when they bought the old Hotchkiss company in New York. He assembled every tower clock they made here for a good many years. When he died the papers in New York carried his death notice. He was very well known as a clockmaker.

“He kept a record of every clock he ever assembled. Had it all down in a big thick book, told where they went and how much they cost and the whole history. When he died I looked high and low for that book, but couldn't find it anywhere.

“I remember one Sunday morning when he was still working for the company I went up to the house and he says, 'Henry, come along with me, I want to show you something. Something that has never been done before,' he said. We went over to the shop, and he had two tower clocks assembled there, and the pendulums on both of them were working together. They were timed perfect. Said it took him about two weeks to do it.

“He was the same way with the clocks around the house. Had 'em all striking together, and if one of them was off time with the others, he worried about it till he got it fixed.

“When I was living in New York, they put up a tower clock on Hamburg avenue, near where I was working—and I watched them put it up. Never thought I'd come up here where

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they were made. That was nearly fifty years ago. You couldn't pay me to live down there any more.

4

“My son had to go down there a few weeks ago on business. He says to me, why don't you take a ride down with me, we'll have a good dinner somewhere. So I did. We had to leave the car on 125th street and then take the elevated, and afterwards the subway. When it came time for dinner, I says 'Let's take the ferry over to Hoboken and eat.' Anything to get out of that damn city.

“When I lived there, it was more like a small town. You knew everybody in your neighborhood. But no more. I wouldn't live there now if they gave me the place.”